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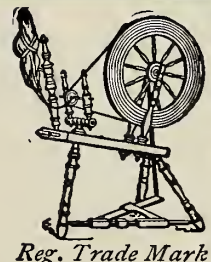
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LINCOLN AS A LABOR LEADER¹

BY LYMAN ABBOTT

ABRAMHAM LINCOLN won his reputation and achieved his service for the Nation by the solution of the labor problem of his time—slavery. How can we apply the principles he inculcated and the spirit he exemplified in solving the labor problem of our time? This is the theme to which I ask your attention this afternoon. For it would be useless for me to attempt to repeat the story of his life, or essay an analysis of his character. This has been so eloquently done by the Chairman of this meeting in his address before the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution in 1900, and by Carl Schurz in his well-known essay, that the repetition of their service would be needless if it were possible; and for me would be impossible if it were needed. I might as well attempt to reconstruct a Saint-Gaudens statue of Lincoln with my clumsy hand as with my faltering tongue to resing the song or retell the story so often sung and so often told. Instead, I shall venture to repeat, from the well-known ode of Lowell, his portrait of the Great Emancipator, and then pass on to my chosen field:

“Nature, they say, doth dote,
And cannot make a man
Save on some worn-out plan,
Repeating us by rote:
For him her Old-World molds aside she
threw,
And, choosing sweet clay from the breast
Of the unexhausted West,
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,
Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and
true.
How beautiful to see
Once more a shepherd of mankind indeed,
Who loved his charge, but never loved to
lead;
One whose meek flock the people joyed to be,
Not lured by any cheat of birth,
But by his clear-grained human worth,
And brave old wisdom of sincerity!
... standing like a tower,
Our children shall behold his fame,

¹ An address delivered at the exercises commemorative of the Centenary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, under the auspices of the Committee appointed by George Brinton McClellan, Mayor of New York, Friday, February 12, 1909, at Cooper Union, New York. The Chairman was the Hon. Joseph H. Choate, late Ambassador to Great Britain.

The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man, Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame, New birth of our new soil, the first American.”

Nearly half a century ago, a young man just entering on my professional career, I came to Cooper Institute to hear the Western orator whose debate with Douglas had given him a National reputation. Some of his friends had broached to him the subject of a nomination to the Presidency. “What,” he replied, “is the use of talking of me when we have such men as Seward and Chase, and everybody knows them, and scarcely anybody outside of Illinois knows me? Besides, as a matter of justice, is it not due to them?” His friends, more sanguine than he was about himself, had resolved that he should be known, and had arranged for some Eastern speeches by him. This Cooper Union speech was the first given in this Eastern campaign. My recollection of the scene is little more than a memory of a memory. The long hall with the platform at the end, not at the side as now; the great, expectant, but not enthusiastic crowd; the tall, ungainly figure, the melancholy face, the clear carrying voice, the few awkward gestures. I had been accustomed to the dramatic and impassioned oratory of Henry Ward Beecher. I was an admirer, not of the principles, but of the perfect literary finish of Wendell Phillips’s rapier-like conversations with his audiences. I listened to a speech that night as passionless but also as convincing as a demonstration in Euclid’s geometry, as clear and cogent, but also as absolutely without oratorical ornament of any description. So much, with some effort, I recall. But no effort would enable me ever to forget the new impulse which that great personality imparted to my youthful imagination. From that moment I, who before that time had been a Seward Republican, became an enthusiastic Lincoln Republican, and have stayed converted ever since. Subsequent study of his life and writings has enabled me to analyze the then unanalyzed impression which

he produced on the young men of his generation. He was an embodied challenge to the conscience of the Nation. He takes a place in American history which belongs to Amos in the history of the Hebrew people: like Amos, a son of the people; like Amos, with a plumb-line of righteousness by which he measured the institutions of his country; like Amos, bringing every political question to the test, What is right? and by that test insisting that all political questions should be determined.

Various stories are told, some historical, some legendary, to illustrate Abraham Lincoln's faith in prayer offered to a God efficient in the affairs of this world. The first expression of such faith that I can find from Mr. Lincoln himself is in his address to his fellow-citizens of Springfield as he starts on his eastward journey to his first inauguration: "I now leave not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell."

From this simple faith in the God who watches over nations as over individuals he never departed. Subsequent events only served to deepen and strengthen it. But in his earlier life, before burdens too heavy for him to bear alone had driven him to look for help to the Helper of men, Mr. Lincoln was an agnostic. He wrote in his youth an essay against Christianity, which, fortunately for his reputation, a wise friend threw into the fire. But if that is the only indication of an anti-Christian faith, there is no indication in his youth of any religious faith, Christian or other. Says Mr. Herndon: "Mr. Lincoln had no faith. In order to believe he must see and feel and thrust his hand into the place. He must taste, smell, or handle before he had faith or even belief." Mr. Herndon's estimate is confirmed by that of Lincoln's wife. "Mr. Lincoln," she says, "had no faith and no hope in the usual acceptance

of those words. He never joined a church; but still, as I believe, he was a religious man by nature. . . . He first seemed to think about the subject when our Willie died, and then more than ever at the time he went to Gettysburg; but it was a kind of poetry in his nature, and he was never a technical Christian."

What profounder religious faith than was expressed in Mr. Lincoln's Springfield speech Mrs. Lincoln looked for I do not know; and what is meant by a technical Christian I am not quite sure. But if Mr. Lincoln had in the early part of his life no faith and no hope, it is certain that from his earliest years he had a conscience. Whether it was inherited from his mother, or acquired by education, or received by a susceptible soul from that mysterious Being in whom we have our life, it certainly dominated his whole nature and controlled his whole conduct. From his youth up he was known among his rough companions as "Honest Abe." They were accustomed to refer to him their controversies and accept his arbitrament, generally without question. If ever there is a time in the life of man when his conscience takes the second place and his passion comes to the front, it is when he is in love. I think Abraham Lincoln's letter to Mary Owens in 1837 is a unique specimen in love literature, of love-making by conscience: "I want in all cases to do right, and most particularly so with women. I want at this particular time, more than anything else, to do right with you; and if I knew it would be doing right, as I rather suspect it would be, to let you alone, I would do it. And for the purpose of making the matter as plain as possible, I now say that you can now drop the subject, dismiss your thoughts (if you ever had any) from me forever, and leave this letter unanswered, without calling forth one accusing murmur from me. . . . Nothing would make me more miserable than to believe you miserable—nothing more happy than to know you were so." He was a man of eager professional ambitions; but his notes prepared for a law lecture in 1850, which was, so far as I know, never delivered, show that in his innermost thought his professional ambitions were subordinated to his conscience. "There is," he says, "a vague popular

belief that lawyers are necessarily dishonest. I say 'vague,' because when we consider to what extent confidence and honors are reposed in and conferred upon lawyers by the people, it appears improbable that their impression of dishonesty is very distinct and vivid; yet the impression is common, almost universal. Let no young man using the law for a calling for a moment yield to the popular belief—resolve to be honest at all events, and if in your own judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation rather than one in the choosing of which you do in advance consent to be a knave."

Lincoln was a man of strong political ambitions; but from the outset of his life his political ambitions were subordinated to his desire for public righteousness. In 1836 he was running for the first time for office. His defeat then would have probably been a permanent end to his political hopes. A Mr. Robert Allen had said that he was in possession of facts which if known to the public would destroy Mr. Lincoln's prospects, but through favor to Mr. Lincoln he would not divulge those facts. Mr. Lincoln writes him: "No one has needed favors more than I, and generally few have been less unwilling to accept them; but in this case favor to me would be injustice to the public, and therefore I must beg your pardon for declining it." And then he adds: "The candid statement of facts on your part, however low it may sink me, shall never break the tie of personal friendship between us." It would be difficult to find a more striking illustration of the dominating power of conscience than in this declaration than an act just to the public and destructive to the writer's ambitions would not sunder the ties of friendship between the writer and the man who had destroyed his political hopes.

A year later, at twenty-eight years of age, Lincoln delivers a Lyceum address in Springfield. He warns the young men to whom he speaks of impending National peril. He fears no attack of foreign foe. "As a nation of freemen," he says, "we must live through all time, or die by suicide." The domestic peril which he fears is not intemperance, nor gambling, nor even slavery, but a lack of

conscience, a disregard of justice, "the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions in lieu of the sober judgments of courts and the worse than savage mobs for the executive ministers of justice." He is nominated by the Republicans of Illinois against Stephen A. Douglas to be United States Senator. He prepares with care his speech of acceptance and reads it to his friends. It opens with these pregnant sentences, since become famous in the political history of America: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this Government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved, but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other." His cautious friends protest. One calls it a fool utterance. Another says it is ahead of the times. A third argues that it would drive away a good many voters fresh from the Democratic ranks. Even his abolition friend, Herndon, doubts its wisdom. "This thing," replies Lincoln, "has been retarded long enough. The time has come when these sentences should be heard, and if it is decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked to the truth. Let me die in the advocacy of what is just and right." In his subsequent debate with Douglas he nails this flag to the mast and keeps it flying there. "The real issue is whether slavery is right or wrong. That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between two principles, right and wrong, throughout the world. They are the two principles which have stood face to face from the beginning of time and will ever continue to struggle."

Such was the man who came to New York and in this hall forty-nine years ago issued his challenge to the sleeping conscience of the city. He was in the commercial metropolis of the Nation, the Corinth of America. All its life was centered in and dominated by its commercial interests. Its great religious societies and its most influential pulpits, with a few notable exceptions, were silent respecting the wrong of slavery. **Cotton was king;**

and New York was his capital. Nowhere more than in New York was compromise popular and uncompromising hostility to slavery abhorrent to popular sentiment; nowhere more than in New York might the woe have been pronounced against those that close their eyes that they may not see, their ears that they may not hear, and their hearts that they may not feel, lest they should be converted. Even the most radical anti-slavery journal in the city damned the Western orator with faint praise. With a moral courage rarely exceeded, though happily not without frequent historic parallels, Abraham Lincoln in this city and to this audience reissued his challenge to the conscience of the Nation. "If slavery," he said, "is right, we cannot justly object to its sovereignty, its universality. If it is wrong, they cannot justly insist upon its extension, its enlargement. All they ask we could readily grant if we thought slavery right. All we ask they could as readily grant if they thought it wrong. Their thinking it right and our thinking it wrong is the precise fact upon which depends the whole controversy." In that issue, so stated, compromise was impossible.

The slavery question seems so simple to us now; but it was not simple to the men of that generation. Let us go back and attempt to conceive it as it appeared to them. The year 1620, which saw the Pilgrim Fathers landing on Plymouth Rock, saw a vessel of slaves landing on the Virginia coast. For nearly two hundred years slavery existed in every State in the Union except Massachusetts, and some citizens of Massachusetts engaged in the slave trade. Partly from moral, partly from economic, reasons, it was gradually abolished in the Northern States. But the invention of the cotton gin created a greatly increased demand for cotton, and the greatly increased demand for cotton created a greatly increased demand for negro labor, and this gave slavery a new life in the Southern States. It was first regretted, then excused, then justified, finally glorified. Other causes tended to promote radical differences between North and South, but they would easily have been overcome had it not been that slavery existed in one section and not in another. For a while a line was drawn across the

continent, and an agreement was reached that south of that line slavery should never be interfered with, north of that line the territory should remain forever free. The abolition of this compromise in 1854 opened Northern territory to slavery and threw the whole country into a ferment of passion and panic. In the light of subsequent history arguments do not seem even specious now that seemed forceful then. They were such as these: Slave labor is necessary to cotton, and cotton is necessary to the world. Slaves have been made property, and interference with slavery is a violation of vested rights. Slavery is recognized by the Constitution; to interfere with slavery is to violate a solemn compact and to rend asunder the most sacred document ever written by human hands. Slavery is justified by patriarchal example, by Old Testament laws, and by Noah's curse of Canaan and his descendants; to demand its abolition is to deny the Bible and attack the foundations of religion. The continued agitation of the slave question destroys business prosperity, paralyzes industry, threatens the destruction of the Union, the last hope of democracy upon the earth; against such disastrous consequences the imaginary welfare of three million black men is not for an instant to be weighed. Thus economics, the rights of property, the Constitution of the United States, the Old Testament laws, the spirit of patriotism, re-enforced by the inertia miscalled conservatism, were all combined in the endeavor to prohibit agitation of the slavery question. Eloquently did Mr. Lincoln sum up the condition of the negro in a speech delivered in Springfield a year before his nomination to the United States Senate:

All the powers of the earth seem rapidly combining against him. Mammon is after him, ambition follows, philosophy follows, and the theology of the day is fast joining the cry. They have him in his prison-house; they have searched his person and left no prying instrument with him. One after another they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys, which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key; the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places; and they stand musing as to what

invention, in all the dominions of mind and matter, can be produced to make the impossibility of his escape more complete than it is.

In the confused and vehement conflict of passions and opinions which only the pen of a Carlyle would be adequate to portray, there emerged two parties, both of which justified the abolition of the Missouri Compromise and the opening of Northern territory to the incursion of slavery. One of these parties in the Presidential election of 1860 was represented by Breckinridge, the other by Douglas. The first demanded the Constitutional right to carry their slaves as property into every State in the Union. Robert Toombs, of Georgia, boasted that he would call the roll of his slaves at the foot of Bunker Hill Monument. The famous Dred Scott decision, that a slave was not converted into a free man by being carried into free territory, gave apparent if not real support to the Constitutional argument of the Breckinridge wing. The other party did not claim that slavery *must* go, but only that it *might* go, into Northern territory. As a compromise between North and South, Stephen A. Douglas invented the doctrine which his friends called popular sovereignty and his enemies squatter sovereignty; the doctrine that the people of any State might determine whether it should be a free or a slave State when they framed its constitution. To both these doctrines Mr. Lincoln brought the plumb-line of practical righteousness. His answer to the Dred Scott decision was: "It is singular that the courts would hold that a man never lost his right to his property that had been stolen from him, but that he instantly lost the right to himself if he was stolen." His answer to popular sovereignty was equally terse and equally unanswerable: "The doctrine of self-government is right, absolutely and eternally right. . . . But when the white man governs himself, that is self-government; but when he governs himself and also governs another man, that is more than self-government; that is despotism."

And his answer to all the defenses of slavery, economic, philosophic, humanitarian, and religious, was summed up in an appeal to consciousness that might have been derived from Darwin's "Emotions in Animals and Man," if that book had

then been written. He says: "The ant who has toiled and dragged a crumb to his nest will fiercely defend the fruit of his labor against whatever robber assails him. So plain is it that the most dumb and stupid slave that ever toiled for a master does know that he has been wronged. So plain is it that no one, high or low, ever does mistake it, except in a plainly selfish way; for, although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who writes to tell the good of it, being a slave himself."

And yet Mr. Lincoln was not an abolitionist. Not because he was less just, but because he was more just; because he recognized rights which the abolitionists did not recognize, and insisted upon duties which they ignored. The abolitionists declared that slave-holders, slave-traders, and slave-drivers "are a race of monsters unparalleled in their assumption of power and their despotic cruelty." Never did Mr. Lincoln utter a word of bitterness or hate against the slave-owner. "I have," he said, "no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist among them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us, we should not instantly give it up." The abolitionists declared that the existing Constitution of the United States "is a covenant with death and an agreement with hell." Mr. Lincoln believed in that Constitution, honored the men who framed it, solemnly swore to support it, and laid down his life in maintaining that solemn oath. The abolitionists demanded "immediate, unconditional emancipation." One of Mr. Lincoln's first acts in going to Congress was to propose a bill for the gradual emancipation of slavery in the District of Columbia, with compensation to the slave-owners; and one of his last acts, before reluctantly consenting to issue an emancipation proclamation as a war measure, was to secure from Congress a pledge of National co-operation with the slaveholders of the loyal States, if they would consent to gradual emancipation with compensation. The abolitionists proclaimed as a fundamental principle, "No union with slaveholders." Mr. Lincoln, in the midst of

the Civil War, wrote to Horace Greeley: ". . . If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." Lincoln was not an abolitionist: because he had charity for the slaveholder for whom the abolitionist had no charity; because he honored the Constitution which the abolitionists denounced; because he used every endeavor to persuade the Nation to assume its share of responsibility for slavery and its share of the burden involved in emancipation, from which the abolitionists endeavored in vain to escape; and because he endured four as sad years as ever have fallen to the lot of any man, in order that he might save the Union which the abolitionists wished to destroy. And yet to the principle, No further extension of slavery on American soil, he gave himself with uncompromising consecration. For that principle he hazarded his own political fortunes, the fortunes of his party, and the life of the Nation. To all remonstrances urging compromise upon him after his election, his answer was the same: "On the territorial question—that is, the question of extending slavery under national auspices—I am inflexible."

I have said that the slavery question was one phase of the labor question. So said Mr. Lincoln nearly half a century ago. "The existing rebellion," he wrote to a Committee from the Working Men's Association of New York, "is in fact a war upon the rights of all working people." To what conclusion would his principles and his spirit lead upon the Labor Question as it is presented to us in our times?

We may be sure that he who never denounced the slaveholder, who never did anything to intensify the profound ire of South against North or North against South, would enter into no class war, would never denounce the rich to the poor or the poor to the rich. He who told the farmers of Wisconsin that the reason why there were more attempts to flatter them than any other class was because they could cast more votes, but that to his thinking they were neither better nor worse than other people, would never flatter the mechanic class to win for himself or his party a labor vote. He who

in 1864 held with workingmen that "the strongest bond of human sympathy outside of the family relation should be one uniting all working people of all nations and tongues and kindreds" would not condemn labor unions. He who at the same time said to them, Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another, but let him work diligently and build one for himself, would have condemned all lawless acts of violence whether against the employer of labor or the non-union laborer who is employed. He who thanked God that we have a system of labor where there can be a strike—a point where the workingman may stop working—would not deny this right to the workingman of to-day. He who said in 1860, "I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich, and I do believe in allowing the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with any one else," would have found, not in war upon the wealthy, but in equal opportunity for all, the remedy for social and industrial inequalities. He who condemned the mudsill theory, the theory that labor and education are incompatible and that "a blind horse upon a treadmill is a perfect illustration of what a laborer should be, all the better for being blind so that he could not kick understandingly," would be the earnest advocate of child labor laws and industrial education. He who argued that "As the Author of man makes every individual with one head and one pair of hands, it was probably intended that heads and hands should co-operate as friends, and that that particular head should direct and control that pair of hands," would believe in co-operation between labor and capital, leading on to the time when laborers should become capitalists and all capitalists should become laborers. He who held in 1854 that "The legitimate object of government is to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they cannot by individual effort do at all or do so well for themselves," would neither believe in the night-watchman theory of government which allows it to do nothing but police duty, nor in the socialistic theory of government which leaves nothing for individual effort to do for itself.

Two solutions of the labor problem present themselves in our time for our

acceptance. One is capitalism, or the wages system: that a few shall always own the tools and implements with which industry is carried on; these are capitalists; and that the many shall always carry on the industry with these tools and implements for wages paid by their owners. This makes the mass of men always wage laborers, dependent upon a few. The other is State Socialism: that the government shall own all the tools and implements of industry, and allot to the various members of the community their respective industries and compensations. This makes all individuals wage-earners employed by an organization, the city, State, or Nation, in the control of which it is assumed all will share. Neither of these solutions would Mr. Lincoln have accepted. Neither of these solutions did he accept. No solution would he have accepted which made the workingman, whether he works with brain or with hand, a perpetual wage-earner fixed in that condition for life, and forever dependent for his livelihood upon any employer, whether private or political. He did not believe in a perpetual employment of the many by a few capitalists; he would not have believed in a perpetual employment of all by one capitalist—the State or the Nation. He believed in a fair field and an open door through which every workingman may become a capitalist, every wage-earner may become his own employer.

In his first annual message Lincoln stated with great clearness his solution of the labor problem. To that statement he attached such importance that he repeated it two years and a half later in his letter to the Working Men's Association of New York. The importance he attached to this statement of his faith justifies my reading it at some length:

"Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration. Capital has its rights, which

are as worthy of protection as any other rights. Nor is it denied that there is and probably always will be a relation between labor and capital producing mutual benefits. The error is in assuming that the whole labor of the community exists within that relation. . . . There is not of necessity any such thing as the free hired laborer being fixed to that condition for life. Many independent men everywhere in these States a few years back in their lives were hired laborers. The prudent penniless beginner in the world labors for wages awhile, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This is the just and generous and prosperous system which opens the way to all—gives hope to all, and consequently energy and progress and improvement of condition to all."

Many years ago I delivered an address to a deaf and dumb audience. The congregation fixed their attention upon the interpreter at my side. They looked at him. Through him they heard me. My ambition this afternoon has been to efface myself and bid you listen to the invisible orator who stands by my side with his sad face, his resolute conscience, his human sympathies, and his simple, sincere English. What, if you could hear him, he would say would be, I think, what he said in 1860 to the capitalists and workingmen of New Haven:

"I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer mending rails, at work on a flatboat—just what might happen to a poor man's son. I want every man to have the chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he can better his condition, when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him. That is the true system. . . . Then you can better your condition, and so it may go on and on in one ceaseless round so long as man exists on the face of the earth."

This is Abraham Lincoln's solution of the labor problem.



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